

MEASURES OF SUCCESS (Touchstone)

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Purpose: The objective of this report is to provide an overview of the current success measures used for small businesses and to look into the connection between success measures and business funding / access to business support. Economic measures used when measuring business performance based on jobs created and sales generated may have a negative effect on the development of women's enterprises. Indications that women-owned enterprises lose out not only on start-up capital but also on available support due to the current measures of success, led to initiation of this research.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The overall design of the research project actively involves the research subjects (self-employed women and women SME owner / managers) in the research design. Women business owners were surveyed as to their definitions of success and their experience of business support. Development of these businesses has been observed in a longitudinal study. A comparative analysis of businesses at the start-up stage with those trading for over a year is presented.

Findings: Interim findings indicate women-owned small businesses do not necessarily use economic measures to measure their success. Success measures are more qualitative than quantitative in case of women-owned small businesses. Further research will be required to develop alternative measures of success - which can be recommended to government and support organisations dealing with enterprises - to replace existing economic measures. Also, further research is planned looking into ways of motivating women-owned businesses based on the success measures as defined in this article.

Implications: This study will provide indications, which women business owners use to measure their own success. Findings will be distributed to policy makers, enterprise support agencies and educators to provide better understanding of women-owned businesses. This research will provide an invaluable research background for further investigation in this area.

Originality/Value: This innovative research is a first of this kind in UK and provides new definitions for measuring performance of small businesses.

Key Words: Success, Enterprise, Women, Measures, Business Support

This version is an edited version of the full research report. For more details go our website, as above.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, much research has been done around the differences between men and women in terms of how they may run their businesses differently.

We surveyed women in business to explore the connections between how they view success, and how the funders of business support judge success. This interest was generated by our experiences of working with businesswomen over several years (through the WEBS project) and from responding to our funder's questions about our beneficiaries' economic success in assessing our effectiveness.

Section one: reviews existing 'traditional' measures of success used by government and business support agencies

Section two: explains how we carried out our research plus some background detail on research participants

Section three: our research findings including women's own definitions of success in business

Section four: conclusion and suggestions for future work in this area.

1.2 Measures of Success

For years, the institutions that fund public and voluntary sector business support services have used certain criteria to measure the effectiveness of the business support provided to small businesses. An assessment of the level of success achieved by these assisted businesses is also made as part of this process. These criteria are often referred to in the voluntary and public sector as 'impacts' and traditionally have concentrated on economically-orientated indicators such as the level of turnover and / or profit, and on the number of jobs that have been created by the business. If the business support agency can show it has provided assistance to a business for a year then 'impacts' will usually be assessed for this period plus some additional time after the intervention of the agency.

We believe there is value in re-defining these 'impacts' - or 'measures of success' - and that new definitions of these measures, if adopted by policy makers and funders, could positively affect the quality of targeted and mainstream business support available to women in the UK. Preferably the definition of these new measures should involve the input of the people most affected - that is - the businesswomen themselves.

Business success is usually measured in terms of economic performance.

"Existing studies commonly define success in narrow accountancy terms using criteria based upon financial analyses and ratios such as sales growth, profitability, cash-flow and productivity" Jennings & Beaver (1997).

As researchers found that women start their businesses not for financial gain but to fulfill personal goals such as increased independence and flexibility, the large gap between what women value and how their success is measured begins to appear.

The most in-depth research on this theme (Buttner and Moore 1997) used focus groups and surveys:

"Most of these female entrepreneurs measure their success foremost in terms of self-fulfillment and achievement of their goals, followed by the traditional performance measures of profits and business growth."

The importance of personal considerations over economic measures was highlighted by Cliff's 1998 study of Canadian female entrepreneurs. This shows these women's companies were smaller compared to their male counterparts' businesses. Research suggesting that women tend to choose smaller, under funded and barely profitable businesses was proposed by (Ethlers and Main, 1998). This may be connected to the findings by SCEDU (2003), which has surveyed students attending Women Business Start-up courses whose businesses were mainly in the service and retail sectors.

Marked gender differences in performance measures were found by (Rosa et al, 1996), with clear indications that women-owned businesses tend to employ fewer staff, 'have lower sales turnover and a lower business value (in financial terms) than their male counterparts'. Research conducted by Walker, Loughton and Brown (1999) on micro-businesses concludes that for micro-businesses the aspect of lifestyle was more important than a purely economic rationale. It also found that businesses that did not employ people still consider their business successful.

Another interesting insight by Stoner and Fry (1982) suggests that women might measure their success in relation to their previous occupation. It's possible that women who felt frustrated by lack of a challenge in their previous job will measure their business success in terms of personal growth or in terms of business profits and growth. Women who had problems with work/family demands might measure their success by work and family balance. Noble (1986) comments that women start a business not as a career but as a life strategy.

1.3 Access to finance

This tendency of women to focus on work/life balance instead of business growth and profits means they can be less likely to get financial backing from banks and other funders or lenders. If women need to borrow funds this clearly puts them at a disadvantage when looking to start-up or expand a business.

Women again were more likely to run smaller businesses than men and tend not to grow in size over the years. Since growth and profitability are directly correlated to size it is clear that however well the women-owned businesses perform, they are likely to be outperformed by a business run by a man in turnover terms as they are likely to have more employees.

We can assume that banks and venture capitalists prefer to provide seed funds to male-owned businesses that have sales projections and a business plan, and are perceived to be more likely to grow and consequently show more profit. This is re-inforced by Carter and Allen (1997) who claim that access to start up capital is mainly dependent on projected growth.

Research has shown that it is particularly difficult for women to acquire satisfactory start-up capital (Brush & Carter et. al, 2000; Shaw et. al, 2002). Women are likely to have less capital, and less access to traditional sources of capital investment than men.

Failure to attract the necessary start-up capital set a difficult path for the future growth of the company.

"Analysis of the acquisition of resources at start-up has shown the greatest differences between women and men.... [which has] a long-term effect on business performance".

DTI (2005).

Perhaps women are less able to plan for growth because they have less access to capital and this is actually a barrier to growth.

"The initial under capitalisation of women-owned firms leads to under performance of their businesses compared with those owned by men – judged by their turnover and the number of employees." (Shaw et al 2002).

Although this barrier is impeding the success of women-owned businesses in economic terms, the under-capitalisation does not destine women-owned businesses to fail, but limits their ability to realize their full potential (Storey, 1994).

So as well as the lack of startup capital, family commitments and lack of resources also mean women-owned businesses may grow more slowly and tend not to plan the expansion of their business. Women are more likely to choose to work part-time due to family commitments, resulting in less time investment than men in developing their business. 54% of women start a business so they can choose what hours they work, compared to only 35% of men (IBM, Feb 2001). However, Carter and Allen (1997) found that the level of resources available to women's businesses had a stronger effect on growth than the owner's lifestyle intentions and choices.

Although much research has analysed why women-owned businesses tend to be small, utilise skills acquired in previous employment, function under a lack of start-up capital, and have a tendency to provide business services in localised areas, it is clear that current economic measures based on growth and sales and profit volume do not work when applied to women-owned businesses. Whilst government and financial institutions use these economic measures to analyse the performance of small businesses it inevitably puts women-owned businesses at a disadvantage.

The low percentage of women's self-employment, enterprise ownership and start-up is indicative of a need for better understanding of barriers faced by women when starting a business. Women constitute only 27% of self-employed people in UK and only 12-13% of businesses are majority owned by women. (DTI, 2003).

1.4 Access to business support

All new businesses benefit from support during the planning stage, start-up and particularly the difficult first few years of trading. Support can be provided in a structured way, from business support agencies or from women's informal networks of family and friends. How support is delivered and the location of services can affect take-up by women.

"Women make decisions about whether to start a business at a local level and in the context of the support and help that is available to them locally. This work needs to be driven forward at the local level in order to have the desired impact." (DTI, 2005). It's important that the support provided to women-owned businesses is sensitive to women's business needs, reflective of social and economic conditions, and aware of the motivational factors that drive women to start a business. Most women-owned businesses were more likely than other businesses to use Public Sector Business Support that is local. (Carter et al 2002)

The importance of small and micro businesses in the regeneration of the UK is widely recognised. Women-owned businesses form a significant proportion of entrepreneurs in the UK and need to be given services they prefer. Women business owners require support which is individually tailored to their needs and that provides follow-up support on a regular basis (Fielden & Hunt 2006). Business support targeted at women is more effective in that women use services for longer, receive more benefit from them and feel more comfortable in such an environment. We explored this in the WEBS case study and found that many women had negative experiences of mainstream business support.

The DTI (2005) found that 70% of women starting businesses seek business support compared to 64% of all businesses.

1.5 WEBS (Women's Electronic Business Support)

Providers of tailored business support – which women prefer – are under threat. Funding is sparse and has been declining rapidly over the last few years. Using economic measures such as turnover

and jobs created to measure performance will continue to undervalue these providers and disadvantage the women who use their services.

See Appendix 1 for an evaluation of the WEBS project (a case study by North West Regional Assembly). The WEBS project ran from 2001–2005 and worked mainly with women-owned businesses providing tailored one-to-one support in areas of general business support, ICT and marketing.

1.6 Summary

Current measures of success disadvantages women-owned businesses and their future success and sustainability. Women-owned businesses and micro businesses in general have their own definitions of success that allows them to evaluate their own performance.

2. Research design and conduct

We started with 42 applicants from which 30 women business owners were selected to participate in the project. The main selection criterion was that they had not previously received business support from us. Approximately half of respondents were at the start-up stage or had been trading for less than a year and the other half had been trading for more than one year.

Each of the thirty businesses completed a 12 month action plan. Specific support with website planning, marketing, search engine optimisation and action planning were provided. These were offered in a way of one-to-one support.

Two questionnaires were developed and in total 28 women completed the survey. The first questionnaire was developed to research the business support needs of women business owners and their experiences in receiving mainstream and targeted business support service. This questionnaire was designed based on the results of the WEBS final report which flagged up that mainstream business support was not always meeting the needs of women business owners.

The first questionnaire attempted to compare services provided by mainstream or general business support with women only or targeted business support available to women business owners. The objective was to compare the expectations with the actual experiences of women business owners when accessing those services.

The second questionnaire was developed to identify the measures of success women apply when running their own business. A survey conducted by an American team of researchers (Moore & Buttner) on measures of success by women business owners was used as a baseline for this questionnaire.

The first section of the questionnaire had 36 statements to reflect the respondent's views. These statements have been coded to determine respondent's views on success measures. It was intended that the scoring should reveal which of the categories was of most importance to a woman running her own business. We categorised the statements into - *Happiness, Health, Family, Skills, Business, Social Contribution, Support Agency*.

The second section of the questionnaire had one open question, which allowed women to elaborate on what they used to measure their business performance. It attempted to determine which tangible measures women used when running their business.

The third section of the questionnaire has a table of success measures such as profit, growth in size, personal satisfaction, social contribution, goal achievement, effective use of time, recognition in the market, self fulfillment and a balance between family and work.

The fourth section was provided to allow women to define their own measure of success.

2.1 Direction of Investigation

Through our work with women-owned businesses, particularly at micro-business and SME level, we have observed motivations and aims particular to women starting their own business. Personal and business success are closely linked for women and our study focuses solely on the experience of women in business.

It is our belief that the measures of success currently applied at regional and European levels when evaluating business support projects, are more appropriate to assess businesses owned by men. As these measures are used to evaluate and allocate funding to business support agencies, an important consequence of this is that the success of women-owned businesses is under-valued and so under-funded.

This primary factor is the main premise of our study. Through our study we have identified a secondary overlaying factor that compounds the disadvantage women experience through the under-valuing of their businesses, namely the trend towards 'mainstreaming' support services, perhaps because of government economic imperatives. Our study shows that many women are either unwilling to use mainstream services, are unaware of them, or use them but have negative experiences of them. This means that in practice women are being short-changed in the provision of adequate and appropriate business support services.

Taking the British government as one example of a funder responsible for increasing the level of women-owned businesses, we can see their goals may be significantly at odds with the goals of many businesswomen just starting out. That is, the benefits of increasing the amount of female start-ups are often defined solely in economic terms. This can eclipse the achievement of women simply getting back to work or taking responsibility for their own financial income, and instead targets businesses that can employ other people and achieve sales.

2.2 Sample Characteristics

From the twenty eight participants, fourteen were at the start up stage or trading for less than one year and fourteen were trading for more than one year. 'New businesses' are defined as those at the start up stage or having been trading twelve months or less; those trading for more than twelve months are called 'established businesses'.

Established businesses were working on their business on average for thirty three hours per week and three said that they work elsewhere. Eight out of the twenty eight respondents had children and two of these were single parents. Of fourteen established businesses only one was set up as a partnership and the rest were sole traders. Twelve new businesses were set up / setting up as sole traders and two companies were incorporated as a limited company. From the total twenty eight businesses, seven offered complementary therapy, three consultancy services, and there were three artists, four web designers, three retail businesses (one of which was trading online only), two photographers, two writers and one online service provider.

All twenty eight respondents had either a desktop computer or laptop and regularly used e-mail for correspondence. All but two businesses had broadband access, and half of them used the Internet to do their shopping. All established businesses and half of the new businesses had their business website up and running. Those who didn't have a website were in the process of setting up one or planning to do so in the near future. Only four out of the twenty eight businesses were selling online. Eight out of the twenty eight businesses said that they update their own website and five of those design websites for others.

3. Findings

3.1 Support

Only six out of twenty eight businesses had a business plan. When asked why they had no business plan the most common reason given was that it was unfinished but in progress. People wanted more time, or assistance to be able to finish it. Several also commented that they were too busy with the day-to-day running of the business and that they prefer to make decisions as they go along. Other comments made were that they

'didn't need a business plan as my objective is to make enough to pay the bills and not grow into a multi-national'.

There is a sense that people believe they don't need business plans if they are small, alongside recognition that some kind of planning is necessary. The most popular areas of support required were marketing, business development, website update and search engine optimization.

Most businesses regardless of their stage of development did not approach support agencies and only seven businesses said that they approached Chamber Link, Manchester Business Consortium, Creative Industries Development Service (CIDS) or Bolton Business ventures for support. Those who approached an agency for support were more likely to approach more than one agency.

Although women indicated that they are fairly confident that they can achieve their business goals by themselves they indicated that they still need support from their family. More women rate family support as important to success than support from business support agencies. Our results also show the huge importance of a mentor relationship; just half of the women had business mentors who support their business, but more than half expressed that having a business mentor would help their business succeed.

Indications are that women business owners look for personalised support in the form of a family and/or a mentor. Women need support in starting or running a business but they do not necessarily approach business support agencies for this.

When we asked what women felt they had to give up in order to start their business, out of the eighteen respondents twelve said they had given up financial security, such as a secure large salary, pensions, a regular income and job security. Interestingly this indicates women are not as risk-averse as other studies may suggest as whilst women are very conscious of the importance of financial security, they are willing to give this up in order to strike out on their own.

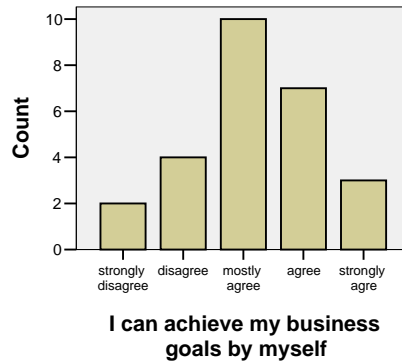
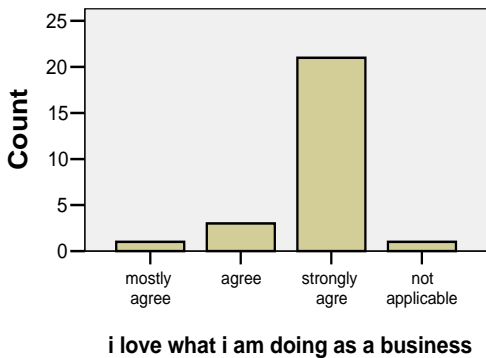
Significantly six women felt that the social aspects of work had been important and they had given up the camaraderie of teamwork and social benefits of working with others. Other things that had been given up were a career, personal life, creative work and free time. They said,
'financial security, status, network, security of a large financial organisation'
'team working, the camaraderie of working with lots of others'

So women are most likely to state financial security and working with others as the two benefits they have given up in order to start a business.

Our evaluation of the women's expectations of mainstream and targeted services compared against their actual experience of services provided, shows that targeted business support agencies perform more successfully over mainstream support agencies. As so few businesses surveyed used other business support agencies for support, our data was not sufficient to be fully representative.

3.2 Success Measures and Motivation

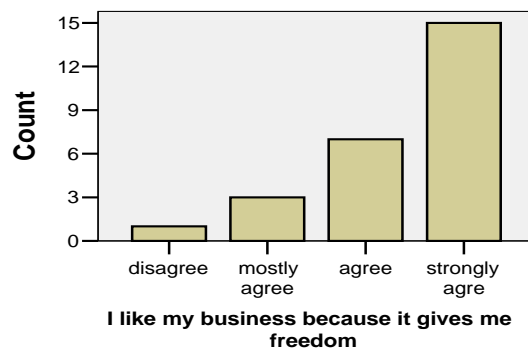
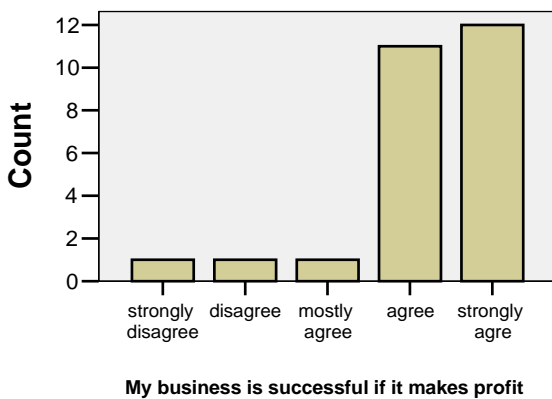
This is the core of what we set out to discover - how women measure their business success. We grouped these success measures into themed categories (e.g. Skills, Happiness etc) and compared them with each other. *Happiness* ranked highest. More detail reveals women business owners are fairly confident that they know what they should do to make their business a success and they are very much motivated to succeed. Despite being very motivated to succeed women are not confident that they know what they should focus on to make their business a success. The majority 'mostly agree' that they can achieve their business goals by themselves, though there is also some uncertainty. However most strongly agree that that they love what they are doing in business.



Graph 1

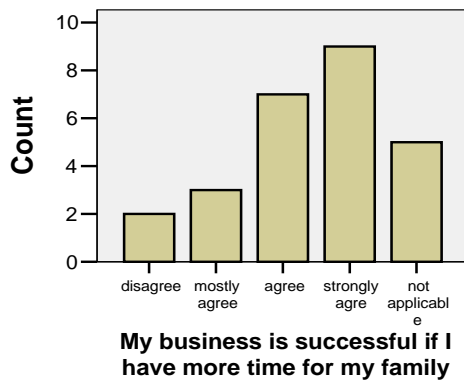
Graph 2

Other indications are that women tend to be motivated by profit, freedom, and by providing a good quality of service when running a business. Women consider their business successful if it makes profit, Graph 3 shows most women agree or strongly agree with the statement “ My business is successful if it makes profit”. Compare with the even stronger agreement stated in Graph 6 saying “My business is successful if it provides a service based on quality”, which suggests that for women business owners profit is not the foremost important factor in determining their success.

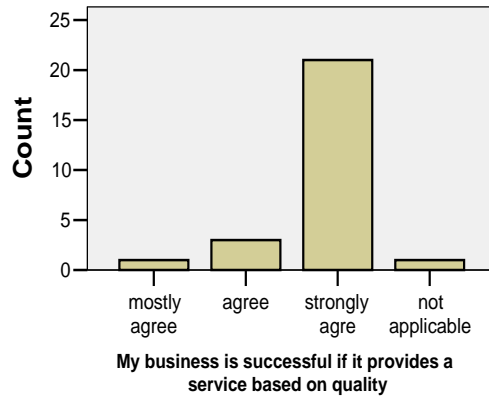


Graph 3.

Graph 4.



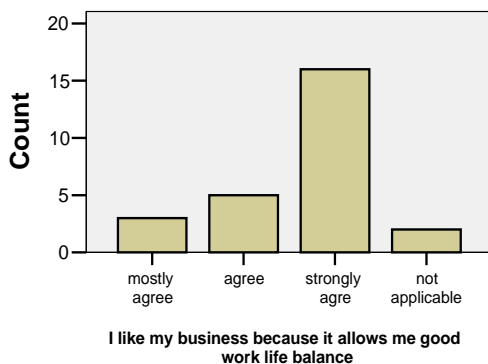
Graph 5.



Graph 6

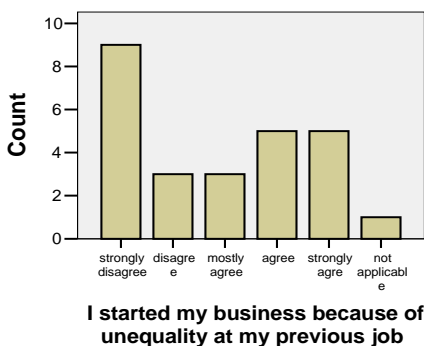
Similarly most women prioritise ethics in business - 23 out of 28 businesses strongly agreed or agreed that ethics should be a high priority in successful business, and most agreed that success is shown by their business being well-known in the community. Almost all women surveyed agreed or strongly agreed their business is successful if they make new contacts with people.

Most respondents like to have a challenging business but also want to achieve better work life balance and more time for holidays. Better time management and quality of life is of high importance to women running their business.

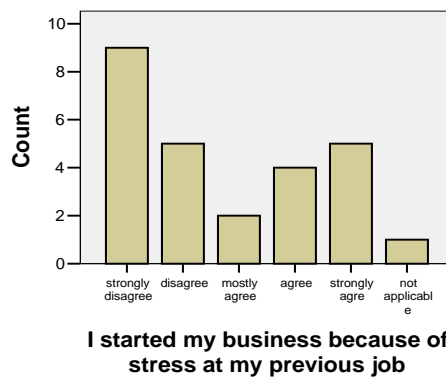


Graph 7

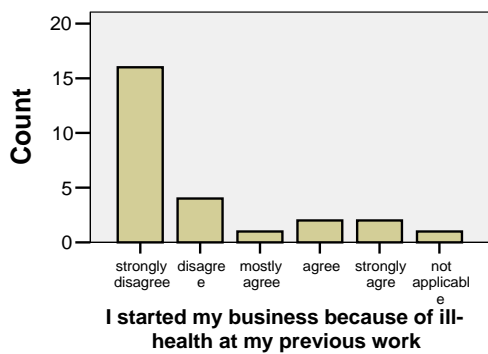
Do women start their business because they are dissatisfied at work? An equal number of participants started their business because of inequality at their previous job to those that didn't. Twelve out of twenty eight started a business because of stress at their previous job. (Graph 9).



Graph 8.

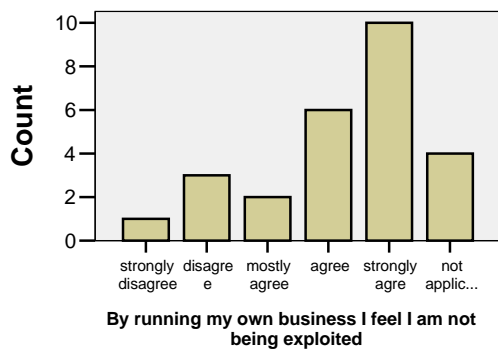


Graph 9.

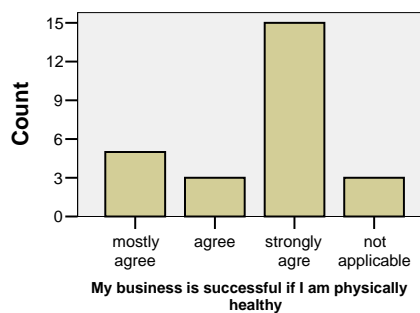


Graph 10.

Only a small minority started their business due to ill-health at their previous work (Graph 10). However, the majority feel that by running their own business they are not being exploited (Graph 11) and they correlate their business success with their health (Graph 12). 10 women business owners said they started their business because of inequality at their previous work and an equal number of women also stated that they do not feel exploited when running a business. This suggests a certain percentage of women running their business started their business to avoid inequality at their workplace.



Graph 11.



Graph 12

Women running their own business do not necessarily depend on grants and funds to succeed. Their responses suggest that women business owners do not spend a great deal of time looking for grants and subsidies when running their business.

Comments on the amount of support given to women included the following:

A woman aged 40-50 who works approx 40hrs p/wk on her business, has been trading for more than four years, has developed a five year business plan, and was in receipt of start-up grants. Her sector is complementary therapy.

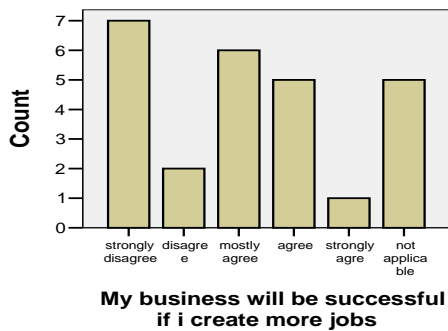
'I feel I have got support more by accident than by design. It would be useful to have a place to go to, e.g. a website which would give info on all available support and support agencies.'

A woman also aged between 40-50 working 40hrs p/wk on her business, has been trading less than a year. Her sector is arts and crafts, and she has also developed a five year business plan.

'business support is useful for women. It needs to be flexible and given to ALL business not just those who make great projects...new businesses need financial support during the early stages'

They do not necessarily measure their business success based on business plan objectives, neither do they feel that their business will be successful if they create more jobs. There is no correlation

between jobs created and business success (Graph 13.) This again suggests that women business owners do not tend to use economic measures when judging their business performance.



Graph 13

It is apparent that women running their own business do not measure their business success based on jobs created, and neither do they plan for growth.

After asking women questions about their level of income / profit and number of people they employed, we asked them how being asked these questions had made them feel. We wanted to get an idea of what psychological responses this type of financial questioning produced, particularly as they are questions commonly asked by business support providers.

These questions produced a negative response in the majority of people. From twenty four respondents, there were seventeen negative responses, four positive and four whose responses were unsure or neutral.

The feelings most often described were embarrassment, disappointment, frustration, fear and stress. Quotes include, *'scared. Not sure how this will happen, cash flow forecasts always seem made up'*, *'embarrassed, I feel I am quite far away from my goal'*, *'like I haven't done what I had planned to'*, *'uncomfortable'*.

Two people said they were unwilling to answer a 'personal financial question'.

Positive responses included 'ok', 'sounds a reachable goal', and 'excited'. It's interesting that though the financial questions were about business, they were perceived or felt to be intrusive and personal.

The second section of the questionnaire explored how women measure their business performance. Their replies showed that the ability to be sustainable and cover the bills, increase number of clients / referrals, have happy customers, be happy in their work themselves, produce quality work and maintain work / life balance, were all popular ways of measuring performance. Typical replies include the following comments:

'I am an artist and designer. Being able to make and sell enough work to make a small profit in the first couple of years. Having a good reputation with word of mouth sales'

'busy calendar; monthly income; enough money to cover business and private expenses; enough money for courses, personal development, enquiries from clients'

'my own level of happiness and fulfillment, enough money coming in, a wish to wake up in the morning and work'.

The third section of the questionnaire asked respondents to rank success measures in order of importance. Growth in size came bottom on this ranking and success measures such as self fulfillment and personal satisfaction came top, followed by a balance between family and work and profit.

3.4 Personal and business goals

We focused on the answers to two key statements to find out how women in business differentiate between 'business' and 'personal' goals. We asked them to state three goals in each category that they need to achieve in their business and personally.

We then themed their responses to see which areas of activity were the most important overall (labeling them 'marketing', 'work / life balance etc'), to compare personal and business goals, then to add them together to create a mean combined score showing which goals were important to most respondents.

Overall, *marketing* (19), *business planning* (15) and *work / life balance* (13) emerge as the top three combined business and personal goals. The attainment of a *stable income* (7) has a middling score (as do *personal development* and *training*), however it appears with almost equal frequency in both personal and business categories. So do *increase profits / increase income* (9), and *creative satisfaction* (5).

Achieving an *increase in income / profits* (9) was an important goal to more respondents than achieving a *stable income* (7). This is an important distinction based on how women worded responses themselves; perhaps they do not necessarily equate getting a stable income with increased profits. However it's worth noting that if we combined these two categories then an increase in income generally would rank on a par with business planning.

Goals which ranked most highly in the personal category but do not appear significantly or at all in the business category, include *work / life balance* (13), *personal development* (7), *developing confidence* (6), and *being healthy, taking exercise* (5).

3.4 Women's own definitions of success

An open question asked women to define business success themselves . We decided to include their responses word-for-word as they are so important.

The ability to earn enough to survive and keep self and family together figures on almost every response, as do work-life balance, personal and client satisfaction, and social contribution. What is notable is how the desire to earn more is often linked to an explanation of what the money is for (do women feel they need to justify their desire for increased income?). In answer to the words 'I would best define business success as...' they wrote the following:

"To have enough income to be able to pay off bills (business and private) and to attend courses by not having to work forty-plus hours."

"Successful cash flow/marketing plan, focused business aims, constant flow of commissions, established and trusted brand."

"Being satisfied with the number and quality of clients /work standards, easily being able to afford to pay for everything that supports me in my work/life and balance. Being able to contribute to helping people look after themselves."

"Provide a good work/life balance and it is fulfilling and profitable."

"Earning good money for delivering first class training."

"Earning a reasonable amount of money, while at the same time taking care of myself and my family and having a sense of personal achievement. Up to now my business has not been very profitable and now I want to take steps to ensure I earn a reasonable amount."

"Covering overheads, helping patients have a better quality of life"

"Good cash flow, being self fulfilled, having satisfied customers, freedom of time management, being part of the community."

"Providing a happy and secure life while not hurting anyone else or damaging the earth in any way; as a bonus doing some good to fellow beings."

"Completing a personal achievement, providing the local community with a satisfying service."

"By how many bookings I am taking in the year."

"A successful work-life balance - being sufficiently challenged (but not too much); having a social impact and making a contribution to wider community."

"Being personally satisfied."

"Offering a good quality service."

"A profitable business."

"Making enough money to pay the bills, but not having to work so hard that I don't see my children practically every day."

"Providing an income whilst balancing this with family life."

"Financial security, work life balance, all the above. Happy family, personal satisfaction, enjoying my job, loving my job!!"

"Offering a social contribution."

"Happiness in running the business, doing the best job for my client, making a good income."

"Income-ability to pay creditors and tax quickly, no overdraft, work booked in for future, happy clients."

"Being able to sell items to like-minded people - competing against the larger competition."

4 Conclusions

When women measure success it is most often based on their personal development and self-fulfillment. Profit is also important – both these factors are important to the women we surveyed for the attainment of success in business. Personal and business goals (as perceived by them) are also closely linked.

However, growth in size is the least important measure of success. This ties-in with our belief that the traditional, or economic measures of success used by government are not entirely appropriate to women business owners, particularly if these economic-orientated measures are used alone.

As our data was collected from a small group of women these findings have to be tested on more businesses, perhaps also on male owned businesses. There is also much to be done in developing alternative performance measures based on our findings, such as how to measure self-fulfilment

and personal development so new measures can be used when working with women business owners.

Successful business support for women should provide the expertise and knowledge that feeds both the business and personal goals of the individual, in order to help steer them towards the kind of success women want.

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Appendix 1

WEBS Project Case Study

This project ran from April 2002 until December 2005 with funding support from the ERDF and ESF amongst others. Project aims were to support women business owners and those considering setting up in business.

The project was not just about traditional business support; we gave advice and referrals regarding funding, business planning, marketing but this was part of a more holistic approach to providing support to women business owners. What may be called a 'transformational' process rather than 'transactional'.

We offered face-to-face, email and telephone support. We also produced a monthly newsletter to keep women informed and updated with developments in business issues, technology and business support. We supplemented this with our monthly networking meetings (Alt.net) and drop-in access for computer and software use.

Women generally have a utilitarian approach to computers, seeing them as tools rather than playthings or a 'hobby'. We recognise this aspect of their relationship with computers and seek to give them the control and practical knowledge to use these important business tools in an effective and pragmatic way.

The main aim was to give our clients a sense of ownership and control of the websites and ICT systems on which their businesses increasingly rely.

One-to-one Support

We found the most powerful and effective way to support women business owners is to work with them on an individual basis. We tailored support to meet the needs of the individual and her business.

WEBS Evaluation questionnaire findings

Of thirty two businesswomen we provided business support to for up to three years, 75% of rated the WEBS service as excellent, 20% as very good and the rest as good. Whilst more than half had seen more than one business advisor, around 40% of businesses had had negative experiences of business support agencies, all of which were with a mainstream business support agency. The WEBS project was a 'targeted' business support agency, providing specialist services for women.

More than three quarters liked to work from home, with a quarter of these saying they also like to work at an office. Around three quarters also said they would not work from home if they didn't have access to a computer and the internet.

WEBS Project performance and lessons learned

WEBS assisted 85 trading businesses over the three and a half years of the project. In addition we have given over 50 pre-start businesses referral advice.

WEBS over-delivered above our targets in all output categories, by between 10%-80%. We also delivered the project within budget. It is significant that from the range of project 'outputs' and 'impacts,' the only funders' targets that were not met were those relating to increased sales and turnover. This fact together with our years of experience in working with business-women led us to

believe that these economic related measures may not necessarily be the most appropriate indicators of business success. This in turn prompted our subsequent 'Measures of Success' research project.

To use these sales figures solely to measure the success of women's businesses is to ignore other important achievements that may be more appropriate measures of success as well as more reliable indicators of likely sustainability.

There was a high level of dissatisfaction with mainstream services from the majority of our clients, and consequently an unwillingness to use mainstream services. As far as we are aware we offered the only targeted women business support service in central Manchester.

Distinctive elements of the service include the high level of one-to-one support beneficiaries received, the integration of advice services with practical access to top-of-the-range facilities, and a particular focus on supplying IT troubleshooting – which no other business support agency offers for free at the level we have provided.

The WEBS project was selected 'best practice' project by the North West Regional Assembly in 2005 / 6.